

# CIVIL SOCIETY ACTORS AND CONFLICT MANAGEMENT IN MOLDOVA. THE ROLE OF OSCE AND LOCAL NGOs\*

Delia Pop-Flanja–Laura-Maria Herța<sup>1</sup>

## Introduction and methodology

Civil society organizations are key factors in post-communist and post-conflict settings. Their role in Eastern Europe, as well as the post-soviet space, has been amply analyzed. There are at least two pivotal themes on which most civil society actors agree and fight in these areas: corruption and reconciliation/conflict settlement. The case of the post-Yugoslav space is relevant and could provide us with several lessons learned from previous civic engagement. In Serbia, for instance, NGOs play a crucial role, even when some are associated with Western donors because they focus on local issues and understand the collective memory, the past, and the mentality. So, civil society is more trustworthy than international actors (Herța 2023a: 53–68). In Montenegro, even more so, the fight against corruption, the departure from communism, and conflict stem from civil society engagement. Moreover, NGOs have been acting as Europeanization agents and civil society representatives have been formally included in the government’s negotiations with the European Union (Herța 2023b: 151–165).

In this article, we will focus on another post-conflict and post-communist area, namely the Republic of Moldova, and the interplay between local NGOs and the OSCE. The Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe has often been seen as a bridge between great powers, and as unique in its focus on the use of mediation and dialogue facilitation efforts in intractable conflicts. In this article, we will investigate the role of the OSCE in the Moldova-Transnistria conflict and the organization’s efforts in contributing to confidence building, from the grassroots level upwards to community leaders. The main goal of this article is to present and



analyze various forms of cooperation between the OSCE and local civil society actors and to identify factors that hamper conflict resolution and conflict transformation.

Methodologically, the article will analyze the conflict and lack of settlement in social constructivist terms, by focusing on identity, social constructs, otherness, and perceptions of “us versus them”. We will argue that identity plays a crucial role in understanding not only the development of the conflict but also the OSCE and Russia, as external factors involved in the conflict. The main research questions are: what causes the lack of progress in OSCE’s peacebuilding efforts? What is missing in the OSCE formula for mediation and facilitated dialogue? And, more importantly, how does identity (i.e. conflicting identities and otherness) play a crucial role in the development of peacebuilding efforts? It is our main contention that there are several intersecting, overlapping layers in this conflict, and identity and perceptions of self and others shape all of them. Also, we argue that the lack of political settlement, and hence conflict resolution, is caused by stark opposing identities, dialogue fatigue, and lack of devotion towards the peace-making process and a mutually agreed upon solution.

## Conflict transformation and identity-based conflicts

Identity conflicts are often analyzed in terms of “competition between rival ethnic, religious or other communal identity groups to gain access to political and economic power” (Rupesinghe 1998: 33). Therefore, when one analyses inter-ethnic rivalry or conflicts along religious or sectarian divides, one refers to either ethnicity or religion as main identity marker or main group identifier. Oftentimes, inter-communal strife also encompasses linguistic or racial differentiation or other cultural issues, which are later framed in political discourse as the main tool for political mobilization. Identities “acquire significance, meaning, and value within specific contexts and cultures and help people understand who they are as individuals, as occupants of particular roles, and as members of specific groups” (Cook-Huffman 2009: 20; Brubaker–Cooper 2000; Deutsch 1973; Tajfel 1982). According to the Conflict Information Consortium (CIC), within the University of Colorado-Boulder, “for an ‘identity’ or inter-group conflict to occur, the opponents must assign an identity to themselves and their adversaries, each side believing the fight is between ‘us’ and ‘them’. Conflicts, where the antagonists seem to be fighting about their identities, are called identity-based conflicts or inter-group conflicts” (<https://www.beyondintractability.org/coreknowledge/identity-issues>).

Back in the 1970s, John Burton coined the term “intractable conflict”. In his view, “human [and collective] needs fuel conflict when they are unfulfilled” and the most important ones are personal development, security, recognition, and identity (Burton 1990; Cook-Huffman 2009: 22).



Burton argued for the existence of both physical and social-psychological needs. As such, identity and recognition are contextually and ontologically framed or constructed. Even security can be construed in both material/Realist terms or social/constructivist ones. Other ground-breaking perspectives in the field of Conflict Resolution also focus on the social-psychological dimension of conflict. Herbert Kelman concentrates on the analysis of conflict as a “process driven by collective needs and fears”, as “an intersocietal process” and as “an interactive process with an escalator, self-perpetuating dynamic” (Kelman 2008: 171–175). In most protracted (prolonged) or intractable (difficult to solve) conflicts, human needs are framed in *and* articulated through group identities. As Kelman showed, the ethnic group, the national group, and the state “serve as important vehicles for fulfilling and protecting fundamental needs” (Kelman 2007: 65).

Building on Burton’s theory (and also in collaboration with him), Edward Azar focused on group identity and coined the term “protracted conflict”. In this view, “protracted social conflicts (PSC) result from the denial of basic needs that are fundamentally connected to issues of identity, including the ability to develop a collective identity, to have that identity recognized by others, and to have fair access to the systems and structures that support and define the conditions that allow for the achievement and building of identity” (Cook-Huffman 2009: 22; Azar 1986; Azar – Burton 1986; Rupesinghe 1998: 45-46). Azar argued that certain social identity conflicts have specific features which make them difficult to settle. He refers to them as long-enduring ethnopolitical conflicts that share common features: first of all, they are conflicts between identity groups, in which at least one of them strongly believes that their basic needs are not fulfilled; secondly, they often reflect the asymmetric, majority versus minority relations, and focus on access to power; thirdly, they are intertwined, in one way or another, with international linkages affecting the course of events, such as kin-states, diasporas, neighboring countries/external actors; and fourthly, they are “based on deeply rooted antagonistic group histories” (Fischer–Ropers 2005: 13; Azar–Burton 1986; Azar 1990; Rishmawi 2019: 1152–1154). It is our main contention that the Moldova-Transnistria conflict is best understood in terms of identity-based inter-communal conflict (in which certain needs related to security, identity, and recognition are presented as not satisfied) and which is linked to external actors (Russia, OSCE, EU) and kinship states (and strong ties between Moldovans and Romanians or between Transnistrian Russians and Russia). Also, we argue that transforming this conflict would entail the transformation of identities in the two communities, as both parts of peace-making and post-conflict peace-building.

According to Roderick von Lipsey, conflict prevention entails the use of “measures and mechanisms that reduce tensions [...] or coerce cooperation between individuals, groups, and the state in such a way as to prevent the occurrence of war” (von Lipsey 1997: 5). Others follow the same line of thought, focusing on the need to prevent a dispute from turning into violent conflict, by tackling conflict prevention as a “set of instruments used to prevent or solve disputes



before they have developed into active conflicts” (Swanström–Weissmann 2005: 5; Berghof Glossary on Conflict Transformation 2012: 17). Since the aim is to find non-violent ways of addressing conflicts/disputes, many practitioners prefer the terms “crisis prevention” or “violence prevention” (Berghof Glossary on Conflict Transformation 2012: 18). “Conflict settlement” is usually employed with reference to an agreement reached by the two parties in a conflict (Ramsbotham, Woodhouse and Miall 2018: 34). The term is meant to indicate the final step in negotiations, mediation or (international) peace-making efforts, but the mere signing of a peace agreement does not necessarily entail enduring peace. The term “conflict containment” signals a form of third-party intervention and often includes peace-keeping (Ramsbotham, Woodhouse, Miall 2018: 34). The deployment of peace-keeping troops, with a mandate built on neutrality and impartiality and with the sole purpose of monitoring a peace accord or a ceasefire, is part of mitigation and de-escalation (von Lipsey 1997: 4-6). As far as “conflict management” is concerned, it “is a theoretical concept focusing on the limitation, mitigation, and/or containment of a conflict without necessarily solving it” (Swanström–Weissmann 2005: 5, 18; Tanner 2000; Berghof Glossary on Conflict Transformation 2012: 18; Ramsbotham, Woodhouse and Miall 2018: 34). Others tackle the phrase as activity which “focuses on how to control, handle and mitigate an open conflict and how to limit the potential damage caused by its escalation” (Swanström – Weissmann 2005: 18). William I. Zartman argued that conflict management refers to eliminating the violent manifestation of conflict and then leaving the conflict to be tackled and, ideally, solved on the political level” (Zartman 1997: 11).

“Conflict resolution” refers to specific measures taken to solve the conflict, ideally addressing its root causes. As defined elsewhere, conflict resolution “has traditionally referred to measures attempting to resolve the underlying incompatibilities of a conflict, including attempts to get the parties to mutually accept each other’s existence” (Swanström–Weissmann 2005: 5-6; Wallensteen 2002; Berghof Glossary on Conflict Transformation 2012: 18). Some view resolution as part of a cycle of intervention meant to settle conflicts, namely one that comes after mitigation, after a peaceful environment has been achieved. As such, mitigation and deployment of peacekeeping troops are the intermediary phase, in which the third party monitors a fragile ceasefire or the cessation of hostilities. After this, another set of actions must be taken to eliminate the sources of the conflicts, and these are resolution measures and mechanisms (von Lipsey 1997: 4–29). Others focus on the broader term or meaning which should include important structural changes but also changes in attitudes and behaviors (from violent or antagonistic to non-violent and cooperation-prone). Here, conflict transformation “implies that the deep-rooted sources of conflict are addressed and transformed” as well (Ramsbotham, Woodhouse, Miall 2018: 34–35). According to many scholars and practitioners, the idea behind all tools, mechanisms, and activities associated with resolving conflicts is that “the future is not seen as conflict-free, but as one where



bonds and models exist that conflict parties can use to find further resolutions instead of resorting to violence” (Berghof Glossary on Conflict Transformation 2012: 18). As explained by Morton Deutsch, the aim of conflict resolution is not to eliminate conflict from inter-group relations, from societies, since this is embedded in human life (Deutsch 1973). Rather, the goal is “to transform actually and potentially violent conflict into peaceful (non-violent) processes of social and political change” (Ramsbotham–Woodhouse–Miall 2018: 36).

The phrase “conflict transformation” is understood as a set of “activities which influence inter-group conflicts to promote sustainable peace and social justice” (Fischer–Ropers 2004: 13). There are two ways in which activities associated with conflict transformation are discussed and interpreted. On the one hand, one can use conflict transformation and conflict engagement interchangeably. In this view, a conflict escalates and the first reaction is to alter it, to contain it, to stop it from escalating further; here transformation is synonymous with de-escalation. On the other hand, most scholars believe that conflict transformation is the final step, not the first reaction, meaning “it goes beyond conflict resolution” (Ramsbotham, Woodhouse, Miall 2018: 34). Conflict transformation entails “change initiatives that include and go beyond the resolution of particular problems” (Lederach 2003). We will show how the OSCE revolves around this exact understanding of conflict in the case of the Moldova versus Transnistria setting.

When conflict transformation is viewed as a process of major structural and institutional transformations, which are designed to trigger reconciliation and build long-lasting peace, it is synonymous with peacebuilding activities. Insofar as our case study is concerned, we believe that peacebuilding would, *inter alia*, entail overcoming post-communist challenges, or as defined elsewhere: post-conflict peacebuilding tries to “establish a system of domestic institutions that are capable of managing the destabilizing effects of democratization” (Paris 2004: ix). Broadly speaking, peacebuilding refers to all activities and efforts designed “to reduce a country’s risk of lapsing or relapsing into conflict by strengthening national capacities for conflict management, and to lay the foundations for sustainable peace and development” (United Nations <https://www.un.org/en/ecosoc/about/peacebuilding.shtml>). In other words, post-conflict peacebuilding means assisting the war-torn society or state in its political, economic, and societal recovery, by overseeing new elections, introducing legal reforms, assisting the return of refugees and internally displaced people, (re)creating democratic institutions, etc.

In contrast to the wide range of analyses that correlate the European Union with inter-communal conflicts or the United Nations with peacebuilding efforts, “little attention has been paid to OSCE mediation strategies in post-communist secessionist conflicts” (Guliyev–Gawrich 2021: 1). The essentials of the OSCE’s approach on conflict transformation go back to the Cold War period, the Final Helsinki Act in 1975 and the resulting “Decalogue” principles. Initially constituted as a bridge between the two Cold War superpowers, between East and West, between two rivaling military blocks, but also one reaching out to the Non-Alignment Movement,



it was instantiated in a series of conferences organized under the umbrella of the Conference on Security and Co-operation in Europe (CSCE), which turned into the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe, in 1995 (Sandole 2007: 65–75; Møller 2008: 2–8). The key rationale, on which the ten principles are built, is related to state sovereignty, limits to states' political independence, mutual assistance, common security, prevention of security threats, individual rights and freedoms, minority rights, and shared values (OSCE Principles 2017: 27–45). The end of the Cold War brought along the rise in so-called “new wars”, intra-state wars, and civil wars, hence the need for international assistance. This led some to believe that it “seemed like a natural invitation to the OSCE to practice what it preached in its indivisible definition of security” (Carr–Can 2002: 95).

The OSCE defines mediation as a “structured communication process, in which an impartial third party works with conflict parties to find commonly agreeable solutions to their dispute, in a way that satisfies their interests at stake” (OSCE 2014: 10). Moreover, “dialogue facilitation represents a distinct approach insofar as it is a more open-ended communication process between conflict parties to foster mutual understanding, recognition, empathy and trust” (OSCE 2014: 10). Mediation and dialogue facilitation are intertwined third party intervention techniques and are built on the idea that the parties involved in a conflict are often stuck in a deadlock, in a cycle of mistrust and grievance; therefore a framework for interaction, rapprochement, dialogue, mutual trust, and confidence building can be provided by an external structure, such as the OSCE or the United Nations, or a regional organization. However, this framework is based on neutrality, impartiality, and non-binding attributes. The third-party intervener can, at best, achieve conflict containment, and conflict engagement and can attempt conflict transformation, by promoting peace-building strategies. But, the settlement of the conflict lies with the two parties. Conflict resolution depends on the commitment and will of the two opposing sides.

## **Contextual framework: the OSCE and local NGOs in Moldova and Transnistria**

According to the Republic of Moldova 2023 Report issued by the European Commission, although the quality of the public consultation process still needs to be improved to ensure transparency, the legislative framework of CSOs is in line with international standards and Moldova has involved civil society in decision-making and in monitoring government policies (European Commission 2023). Two of the positive aspects of civil society involvement highlighted in the report are the support offered to Ukrainian refugees and public institutions, as well as the Law on associations for inter-community development adopted by Parliament in 2023. The lack of a “comprehensive overview of the CSO ecosystem in Moldova” and the “gap in coordination and synergies are critical for an effective humanitarian





Another organization relevant to the purpose of our research is the National Center for Support and Informing of NGOs Of Moldova "CONTACT", which also developed partnerships with NGOs on the left bank and whose mission is the strengthening of civil society and the promotion of participatory democracy. OSCE Moldova is among the partners and donors of the Center and some of the common projects developed in the area of conflict resolution are "Increasing capacity, trust and access to services to strengthen human rights protection on both banks of the Nistru river", "Building confidence on both banks of the Nistru River by increasing local capacities and human rights protection" or the "Development of civil society in Transdnistria". Although little information about these projects is available on the website of the Center, their overarching goals align with the broader objectives of peace-building efforts in the region.

An additional NGO that we consider should be listed among those fostering a more collaborative environment in the region, although we acknowledge the non-exhaustive approach and the difficulty in accessing information related to CSOs and the results of their activities, is the Institute for Democracy from Găgăuzia. The main fields of activity of this organization include increasing citizens' participation in the life of the state, offering legal and psychological assistance, and introducing into the public consciousness "a holistic view of human rights"; the OSCE catalog also highlighted the institute's partnership with Transdnistrian NGOs and that it received an award for outstanding achievements in human rights from the West-Regional Association of UNESCO Clubs – Ukraine (OSCE 2021). The OSCE, being a donor of the Institute for Democracy, supported one of the projects conducted by the institute to fight trafficking and increase the role of the Police.

An interesting status is the one of CSOs having a double registration, on both banks, which, according to the European Union Roadmap for Engagement with Civil Society in the Republic of Moldova – 2021–2027 report, increases their strength and capacity to receive donor funding and grants. This aspect is even more relevant taking into consideration that most NGOs in the region rely on external funding from donors, although Transdnistrian CSOs "claim that cross-river partnerships with CSOs from the right bank for common project funding and project implementation are often not established on an equal basis and do not allow them to fully benefit from donor support" (EEAS 2024: 2)

Since the peacebuilding activities of the OSCE in the region are numerous and diverse, and their impact is difficult to quantify, we consider the platforms of discussion between CSOs from both banks, facilitated through mechanisms of the Mission to Moldova, to be useful for extending the benefits of those activities. One such platform is the Donor's Forum, a yearly event that has reached its 10th edition in 2023 and where CSOs from both banks meet and share information among themselves as well as with other potential development partners. The 2023 edition gathered over 80 CSOs to advocate for "resilience, stronger partnerships, and mobilizing local communities" (OSCE 2023). Apart from the Donor's Forum,



the Mission hosts dozens of working group meetings, “which serve to build trust between the two sides through joint resolution of social and economic issues” and is involved in Moldova’s implementation of the Action Plan on the Strategy for the Consolidation of Interethnic Relations for 2017–2027 (OSCE 2019). We consider these platforms for dialogue can, ideally, contribute to building a stronger sense of community and to the collective meaning-making embedded in the social-constructivist approach. However, as argued here, in reality, identity building and the sense of belonging in Moldova and Transnistria always remained, and have been perpetuated, in parallel at best, and in opposition most of the time.

Cooperation with civil society is necessary, as “local ownership of the resolution process is very important” and it can contribute to a more positive perception regarding the role of international organizations in the region (Goda 2016: 205-206). Criticism about its “unilateral” character has led to changes in the work methods of the OSCE, to promote a strategy more supportive towards civic initiatives in conflict regions and democratic values (Corincioi 2005: 231). Cooperation with local civil society organizations, as imperative as it might be in such high-stakes conflict situations, is not deprived of significant and sometimes less evident obstacles. For example, the OSCE Network of Think Tanks and Academic Institutions proposed in 2018 a cooperation project based on a non-polarized setting for conflict resolution for international third parties and researchers, through cross-regional dialogue among peacebuilders, which can contribute to overcoming the us vs. the framework and offer practical recommendations. Since the project involved interviewing civil society actors, some of the challenges identified were that, in the case of protracted conflicts, the space for dialogue is rather limited, dialogue fatigue might intervene in the absence of tangible results, or interest in dialogue with those on the opposite side might be insufficient because of the length of the conflict which normalized to a certain extent the non-cooperative approach; other aspects to be acknowledged are the diversity of civil society groups that can make a unitary approach ineffective or the differences in scope and status recognition. Building trust is an aspect of utmost importance for the success of such forms of dialogue, and the report showed that some possible manners for international organizations and local peacebuilders to build trust is to limit the “politicization of dialogue” and the similarity in approach to official negotiations, or to share knowledge through cross-regional platforms (OSCE Network 2019).

Despite numerous efforts and all platforms of discussion between CSOs from both banks of the Nistru/Dniester River, facilitated through mechanisms of the OSCE Mission to Moldova, no real confidence building and reconciliation was attained. Putină and Brie argue that “although the civil society sector in Transnistria may seem quite dynamic and functional at first glance, it is essentially worthless because the current NGOs operating in the separatist region lack independence. Most of them actively cooperate with the de facto authorities and perceive the informal sector more as a mechanism for receiving external funding than as a monitoring and oversight function” (Putină–Brie 2023: 92).



Moreover, according to the 2024 Freedom House report on Transnistria, civil society activity is closely controlled by authorities and “civic activists operate in a repressive environment” (Freedom House 2024).

## Stuck in a frozen conflict: OSCE socialization versus Russian socialization

The OSCE became involved in post-soviet conflicts in the early 1990s, by establishing its missions to Georgia, in 1992, and to Moldova, in 1993, following territorial breakaway actions undertaken by separatists in these former soviet republics. According to the OSCE mandate, the mission to Moldova is tasked with sustained efforts “to facilitate the achievement of a lasting, comprehensive political settlement of the conflict in all its aspects” and the overall goal is based on the following implicit objectives and commitments:

*“Consolidation of the independence and sovereignty of the Republic of Moldova within its current borders and reinforcement of the territorial integrity of the State along with an understanding about a special status for the Trans-Dniester region; An agreement on the withdrawal of foreign troops; Effective observance of international obligations and commitments regarding human and minority rights; Assistance in monitoring the implementation of agreements on a durable political settlement.”* (CSCE Mission to the Republic of Moldova 1993: 1; Goda 2016: 206–207).

The 1990s were marked by the 3+2 format under the auspices of the OSCE and Yeltsin’s approach. Later, Putin was confronted with specific obligations resulting from the 1999 Istanbul Summit, such as the OSCE’s welcoming “of the commitment by the Russian Federation to complete withdrawal of the Russian forces from the territory of Moldova by the end of 2002” (OSCE 1999: 49–50). Consequently, the period 2000–2005 was characterized by Russian reinterpretations of the wording of the Istanbul Declaration/Document regarding the role of peacekeepers in Transnistria. For a long time, the Russian discourse focused on a “synchronization strategy”, based on the idea that troops should be maintained until a political solution is found. The new Russian foreign policy insisted on intertwining the withdrawal of Russian troops with the settlement. This was not only a new interpretation, but also a deviation from the Istanbul Pact, which requested a unilateral withdrawal of military forces (Flikke – Godzimirski 2008: 29–30). Moreover, the Russian strategy tried to attract both Chişinău and Tiraspol in a form of union, intense cooperation with Moscow, and to socialize both political leaderships and the two societies in the Russian understanding of conflict settlement in the post-soviet space. Gradually, if successful, this would make “the participation of the OSCE in conflict resolution redundant”, as stated by some Duma members (Flikke–Godzimirski 2008: 36). Another argument insisted that “Russian forces should simply be transformed into a post-settlement peacekeeping unit or stabilization force” (Flikke – Godzimirski 2008: 48).



The Russian interpretation also tried to argue that if Transnistria was a *de facto* state, then somehow, “Russia’s troops were already *de facto* OSCE peacekeepers” (Flikke – Godzimirski 2008: 49).

Starting with 2005, the OSCE mediation efforts have been marked by official talks in the “5+2” format (Moldova, Transnistria, the OSCE, the Russian Federation, Ukraine, the European Union, and the United States). Individual OSCE participating states were on and off engaged in specific activities, such as the UK, which “promoted confidence-building measures between civil society, business and grassroots actors from the conflict sides” or Germany, which “supported, through a specialized NGO, capacity building for the offices of the parties’ chief negotiators aiming at strengthening the analytical and negotiation skills of their staff” (OSCE 2014: 69). Despite all these, until 2022, no considerable and consistent success has been obtained in determining Transnistria to reintegrate into Moldova. The 2022 Russian aggression against Ukraine complicated matters even more, escalating tensions in the separatist region. In the view of OSCE, “dozens of intermediary decisions and agreements have been signed over the last 20 years in different spheres between the sides, most of which have been only partially or not at all implemented. Both sides usually lacked confidence in the good-faith implementation of the agreements by their counterpart” (OSCE 2014: 75).

What causes the lack of progress in this form of mediation? What is missing in the OSCE formula for mediation and facilitated dialogue? And, more importantly, how does identity (i.e. conflicting identities and otherness) play a crucial role in the development of peacebuilding efforts? It is our main contention that there are several intersecting, overlapping layers in this conflict, and identity and perceptions of *self* and *others* shape all of them.

Firstly, we tackle the external parties and problematize the following: is there a conflict of identities regarding the OSCE and Russia? Russia’s involvement in the Moldova-Transnistria conflict, alongside the OSCE, displays how Russia perceives itself as a member of the organization. During the Cold War Period and the 1990s, Russia viewed the CSCE/OSCE as the key agent in European security and as an alternative to NATO. Russia, as successor of the Soviet Union, was also a founding member of the OSCE and the UN (Morozov 2005: 70–71), so its role in both organizations was valued and loaded with implications about security, and principles of sovereignty. The OSCE was intertwined with post-Cold War Russia and thus a better option and a real contender to NATO. Gradually, though, some started to wonder not whether one can construe OSCE’s identity without Russia, but rather whether we can talk about OSCE’s identity *with* Russia (Flikke – Godzimirski 2008: 55-56). The changing attitudes and perceptions regarding state territorial integrity, human rights, and human liberties placed Russia at odds with many countries in the West and, ultimately, with the OSCE itself (even though many European states were mild in addressing criticism against Russia). Consequently, Russian involvement in this conflict is shaped by how Putin’s Russia perceived its relation with the OSCE and its role in “European security”.



Secondly, the main argument in this article is that the Moldova-Transnistria conflict is best understood in terms of identity-based inter-communal conflict, which revolves around specific physical, but equally important, ontological and social-psychological needs related to security, identity, and recognition that are not satisfied. There are also two distinct identities. One has been shaped in the Republic of Moldova, transitioning from the political/soviet and social construct of Moldovan towards Romanian. This identity is strongly linked to cultural and historical links, to language and group affiliation, but also to strong, self-perpetuating ties to a kinship state and intense interactions between Moldova and Romania (Corpădean 2015; Corpădean 2019; Brie 2016; Brie 2021; Brie 2023; Musteață 2019). A further split is created along the lines of Moldovan versus Romanian identity. This divide is also fuelled by external voices and weakens the collective identity in the Republic of Moldova. At their turn, Transdnister Russians and Russia have historically developed and perpetuated a parallel community (Kaiser–Chinn 2019), and the Russian language was always a powerful marker of a distinct Transnistrian cultural and political identity, serving as a tool of separation from the Republic of Moldova.

We argue that solving this conflict would entail the transformation of identities in the two communities, as both parts of peace-making and post-conflict peace-building. This is a very difficult task, given the fact that Transnistria was socialized into Russian understandings of self-determination, the security of Russians outside Russia, and the Russian role in world politics. On the other hand, many people in the Republic of Moldova have been exposed to and are being socialized in the EU, Western values, and intersubjective meanings of human rights, sovereignty, security, and recognition. The OSCE has been engaged in the Moldova-Transnistria conflict for many years, but the conflict is far away from resolution. Some argue that communication strategies employed by the OSCE, and implicitly stronger links to local think tanks, could be improved (Goda 2016: 206–207). Our main argument is that the best the OSCE could do in this conflict is to continue mediation efforts and pursue conflict transformation. Conflict resolution entails not only political settlement of the conflicts but also reconciliation and genuine commitment of parties to its resolution. What we understand by conflicting parties here is a local agency, meaning both political and societal agents. We employ agency in sociological and constructivist terms; in other words, the role played by international organizations is limited, unless the two parties fully commit to finding a mutually agreeable solution. In the case of identity-based conflicts, reconciliation, and settlement are even more difficult, since they entail deep changes in identities, discourses, and projections about *self* and *others*. Consequently, mediation efforts are victims of dialogue fatigue, fake displays of confidence building (especially in Transnistria), and *otherness*, the “us versus them” mindset.





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